

MARK MADISON: Okay. Today is June 29th, 2011, and my name is Mark Madison at the National Conservation Training Center, and this week we're having a conference for bright high school kids from around the country who might want to pursue environmental careers called the Student Climate and Conservation Congress, and one of our speakers this morning was Dr. John Francis, who has an extremely interesting career and has been kind enough to come downstairs and talk with us a little bit for this Podcast.

Let me just tell you a little about Dr. Francis. Dr. Francis was energized in his 20s when the 1971 oil spill in San Francisco Bay jarred his comfortable life as he joined volunteers to help scrub the beaches and save the birds there. He felt the need to make a deeper, more personal commitment to the environment, and, boy, did he ever! He decided to stop using motorized vehicles and eventually took a vow of silence. He topped using motorized vehicles for 22 years, is that correct, Dr. Francis, and he stopped talking and only listened for 17 years, which is kind of an inspiration to us all.

So, Dr. Francis, thank you so much for coming to Shepherdstown.

JOHN FRANCIS: Well, thanks, Mark. You know, as I said, thanks for being here, you know, because it takes two to communicate, you know.

MARK MADISON: It does. I'm sure that's a lesson you learned from your 17 years of silence.

Tell us why you made these two decisions to stop using motorized transport and stop talking.

JOHN FRANCIS: Well, you know, the not riding in motorized vehicles, it seems kind of obvious. It's a connection that I had made when looking at an oil spill and looking at myself driving a motor vehicle and realizing that the reason they were in the

Bay with the oil was partly because of the demand that I was part of to have them there to get oil cheaply as they could and as quickly as they could for my use. And so that was an easy, no-brainer, as they say, to make that choice to start walking.

The not talking was a little more difficult for me because I had looked at the practice of remaining silent in my earlier life as a religious person, going in the monastery, and I thought, that's not for me, not talking, come on! But because I was in so many arguments about the decision not to ride in motorized vehicles, when people in my community mentioned that I really wouldn't make a difference, one person couldn't make a difference, I decided on my 27th birthday to remain silent for one day, and it was that one day that I learned that I hadn't been listening, and so I listened a little more, and then I realized that it was even-- it was even more profound than just listening; it was being able to tell the truth; it was being able to recognize the truth and a lot of other things that came from the silence. And discovering who I was as a person, as an African-American was paramount. So I took that vow to be silent for a year, which I renewed every year.

And it's great to be here in Shepherdstown, because the students here are just so bright and so committed already in what they're doing. I applaud you on being able to find such students. It's almost like preaching to the choir except this is a very young choir, and they are looking for direction and they're looking for inspiration from all of us. So to have that opportunity to speak with them and touch them and be touched by them and to listen to them is a great opportunity for me.

MARK MADISON: Well, you were very inspiring, and the students had a lot of questions. We could have gone three hours with their questions. We had to cut them off. But I wonder what you think-- you made your choice to stop riding

motorized vehicles and to stop talking. Do you think that's a choice they should make or do you think they ought to find their own voice, no pun intended, to speak out on these issues?

JOHN FRANCIS: I won't take that as a pun.

You know, I try to keep from saying what it is that a person's journey is, because I don't know. That is something that we have to discover for ourselves. I do say that being who you are and discovering that person and being that person is probably the most powerful thing that you can do for all of us, and so that I unreservedly will recommend.

Now, some students asked me about walking, if they should walk, or if they could walk. And I get lots of e-mails from people around the country who want to walk. And so what I will say, and what I'm trying to come up with is a way that instead of going to, you know, some far-off land for-- Europe to kick around for a year and find yourself, that maybe in your own community you can become a planetwalker and just give up riding in motorized vehicles and walk, and I don't know if you want to stop talking, but, I mean, that's a possibility.

I don't think that it's something that you'll suffer. I think it's something that would be a great learning experience for you, just as maybe going to some European country and kicking around for a year or two. But it's something that you can do right here at home, and I think it has measurable benefits. You can lower your carbon footprint, and you will definitely affect your family's lives and the lives of your friends and the community, I believe.

MARK MADISON: An internal journey versus an external trip.

JOHN FRANCIS: Yes.

MARK MADISON: Now, people might be surprised that when you were not riding motorized vehicles and not talking you were not limiting yourself to a small geographic area or a small career path. Tell us some of the things you did during those years. Because I think it's amazing, actually.

JOHN FRANCIS: I did get around.

MARK MADISON: Yes, you do.

JOHN FRANCIS: I walked up-- from California, from near San Francisco, Pt. Reyes, about 500 miles every year to visit the [inaudible] Wilderness. It's not like one of those grand wildernesses like you can find up in northern Washington be the Paysaten, lots of views and mountains. This is kind of low elevation canyons and rattlesnakes and hornets and things like that, but it's nature, nonetheless. And I spent a lot of time there. And then I'd walk back in the fall. And I would do that, and eventually I made-- was befriended by a gold miner there and lived with a gold miner, Perry Davis and his wife Ruth, for a winter, and came out and went to school at Southern [inaudible] State College.

From there I returned to the bay area, apprenticed as a wooden boat builder, founded Planetwalk, started walking around the world as part of my education in the hope that I could benefit all of us, but figuring I'd figure that out along the way.

Went to Missoula, Montana, and did a master's in environmental studies there and then on across the country to Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, where I did my Ph.D. in oil spills and ended up working at the Coast Guard writing oil pollution regulations for the United States.

And from there I sailed through the Caribbean and then walked the length of South America. I started talking, though, in the East Coast of the United States in 1990.

So--

And now I'm headed back to Madison, Wisconsin to be a visiting professor there at the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies to teach Redefining Environment. And "environment" for me now has changed from just being about pollution and just being about climate change and the loss of species and habitats and things that we traditionally think of as environment, but to also have to include the human environment, because we're part of the environment, and as being part of the environment, it's our first opportunity to treat the environment in a sustainable way, or even to understand what sustainability is, is in the relationships we have with ourselves and each other. So it's a human rights and civil rights and economic equity and gender equality, and pretty much all the ways that we relate to one another that environment has to embrace in order to be effective. Because as we do all the work that we're doing, we really want it to make a difference, and I think we begin by making that difference in our own personal lives with our relationships with each other.

MARK MADISON: That sounds perfect. It's very-- a nicely-- I mean, the circle that you're at the Nelson Institute, because Gaylord Nelson, obviously, was the founder of Earth Day. He was very interested in getting humans incorporated into the environment. He was actually the first speaker we had out at this place shortly after we opened. He was a family friend, and I think he would be very thrilled that you're coming back to Wisconsin to make these connections.

JOHN FRANCIS: I would hope so. And, of course, Aldo Leopold is at Wisconsin, and John Muir is at Wisconsin, and so, yeah, I guess it's a great magnet for--

MARK MADISON: Breeding ground for conservationists.

JOHN FRANCIS: Yes, breeding ground for conservationists and activists.

MARK MADISON: John, this has been a very short Podcast, and, you know, you have had a fascinating life, and we just touched on a few episodes of it. Are there books or web sites people could go to learn more about Planetwalk and your career?

JOHN FRANCIS: Well, we have a web site, planetwalk.org, and that's a nonprofit web site, but also National Geographic, I'm a fellow at National Geographic, and my hope is this Podcast is heard on that web site as well. It has enormous reach. But National Geographic has also published two books... "Planetwalker," which will be made into a motion picture at some point, and "On the Ragged Edge of Silence: Finding Peace in a Noisy World" has just came out in March. So, yeah, you can get those at your bookstore or the National Geographic web site.

MARK MADISON: That sounds good. Do you have one take-home message for folks that are listening?

JOHN FRANCIS: Well, the take-home message for me, I think I said it before, but please take this to heart and take it home. The environment is about how we treat each other. So let's treat each other well.

MARK MADISON: Thank you, John. This is has been Dr. John Francis at the Student Climate and Conservation Congress for 2011, and he's just joining us for a brief broadcast. Thank you very much.

JOHN FRANCIS: Thank you, Mark.